



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 7, 2016

Sabres-Maple Leafs Preview

By Kevin Chroust

AP

March 7, 2016

If any team can sympathize with Toronto's struggles, it's probably Buffalo. The Maple Leafs have replaced the Sabres as the NHL's worst team, a title held by their Atlantic Division foes for the previous two seasons.

That status hasn't quite been cemented for the season with just over a month to go and the Eastern Conference's two worst teams still meeting three times, and Monday night's tilt in Toronto threatens the Maple Leafs with their second six-game losing streak of the season.

After Saturday's 3-2 shootout loss to Minnesota, the Sabres (26-31-9) are nine points up on the Maple Leafs (21-33-10), though Toronto has two games in hand as it plays the third of a four-game homestand.

Buffalo took a 2-1 lead in the second period but gave up a goal with under six minutes left in the third and let another point slip away in a shootout.

Jack Eichel and Johan Larsson each scored for a second straight game, and Larsson has three of his five goals for the season in the last five contests.

"I think we played well, too," said Eichel, who added an assist. "We had a lot of chances. We did a lot of good things as a team. It's a tough one to swallow."

The Sabres have won one of their seven shootouts this season with six straight losses, but the win came against Toronto. Eichel was the only of four Sabres to convert versus the Wild, and they've gone 1 for 18 on shootout chances in the defeats.

"It's just frustrating with our shootout results this year," Eichel said. "The shootout's an opportunity to grab an extra point. I think as a group we can bear down and start taking advantage of it."

The difference in regulation was a failed penalty kill on Buffalo's only short-handed situation of the game. The Sabres have allowed a power-play goal in consecutive games but have killed 27 of 30 penalties over the last 10 contests.

"A big kills probably wins us the game," coach Dan Bylsma said. "Our penalty kill has been so good for us for long periods of the game."

The Sabres have averaged 3.5 goals over a 3-0-1 span in the series, winning 2-1 in the shootout on Oct. 21 in the season's only meeting. That was part of a 0-5-1 stretch for Toronto on which it scored nine goals.

On it's current skid, there have been seven goals in five straight regulation defeats. After Saturday's 3-2 loss to Ottawa, the reaction wasn't quite as dour as one might expect.

"I thought we had lots of good things today," coach Mike Babcock told the team's official website. "I thought (Zach) Hyman, (Nikita Soshnikov) and (William) Nylander were all real good for us, which is a positive. I thought our team pace was as good as it's been all year."

The 19-year-old Nylander scored his first goal in his fourth NHL game, while the 22-year-old Soshnikov got his second in his fourth in the league.

They'll have fellow youngster Garret Sparks in front of them in goal with the 22-year-old hoping to improve on a 2-2-0 record, 2.14 goals-against average and .925 save percentage in his last five NHL games.

He'll face Chad Johnson, who has won consecutive games as part of a 4-3-1 span with a 2.34 GAA and .927 save percentage. He beat the Maple Leafs back in October to improve to 2-0-1 with a 2.02 GAA and .924 save percentage in four career matchups.

Sabres' Johan Larsson again finding net late in season

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
March 7, 2016

Johan Larsson bid farewell Sunday to his father, who flew back to Sweden after a week with his son. He picked a good week to visit.

Larsson scored in back-to-back games for just the second time in his career and also skated against rookie phenom Connor McDavid in his new role as the Sabres' shutdown center.

"He's been here a couple times now, but it's always nice to have your family and some friends here," Larsson said in First Niagara Center. "It's always nice to score when he's here, and it's nice to talk to him after the game."

There was plenty to talk about. Larsson skated 18 minutes against Minnesota on Saturday, just eight seconds off his season high. He boosted his goal total to five after also scoring Thursday against Calgary. He'll try to find the net in three straight games Monday when the Sabres visit Toronto.

"It's just going in for me now," said Larsson, who has three goals in five games. "I'm confident. I'm trying to work on it every day in practice, trying to hit the net a lot, be in the right spots. I had some good looks, but I've been missing the net on those looks. I'm trying to focus on hitting the net and at least try and make the goalie save it."

This is the second straight year in which Larsson is putting together a late-season rush. He took over as the Sabres' No. 1 center following the trade deadline last year and finished with five goals and 14 points in 17 games. This year, with Ryan O'Reilly injured, the Sabres are relying on Larsson to be a defensive stalwart.

"I think he's done a real good job in that spot," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "I think that's where his role is on the team. Some people label that fourth-line center or checking center or third-line center. I'm not going to get too caught up in that, but I think that's a very good spot for him to be in and wanting to think he's showing he can be in.

"The fact that he's picked up a couple goals here and there lately is just a benefactor of him being in the right spot at the right time. I think he can add in that regard but really be more the role of a checking, defensive, hard-to-play-against guy."

It's not an easy role, especially mentally. Larsson is a respectable minus-1 in the seven games without O'Reilly, but players such as Edmonton's McDavid and Minnesota's Mikko Koivu are too good to shut down for an entire game. Larsson has had to accept the fact he'll lose his share of shifts.

"It's hard," he said. "They're going to be in your zone and play. They're good players. You've got to respect that.

"But at the same time you've got to play down there and make them play defense. I think that's the most important thing, get them frustrated with the game and maybe you can score a goal or two."

While Larsson has shown he can excel late in a season, he needs to prove he do it for a whole year. The 23-year-old will be a restricted free agent after the season, and it's tough to build a case for a long-term contract when he recorded just one goal and five points in the opening 47 games. Rochester centers Tim Schaller, Jean Dupuy and Eric O'Dell will look to take his spot with the Sabres next season.

Larsson is ready for the competition, which would have been even fiercer with his original team. The Sabres acquired Larsson from the Wild in April 2013, and he saw firsthand Saturday what their depth chart looks like.

"I glad I'm here," Larsson said. "I have a real good chance here, and we have a real good team now. I'm excited to be here."

Sabres notebook: Goalie Chad Johnson adjusting to lighter workload

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
March 7, 2016

Chad Johnson has been a backup for most of his career, so being used sparingly is something he knows how to handle.

It's tougher this time, however, because he'd gotten used to being in Buffalo's net.

Johnson will start for just the second time in 10 games Monday when the Sabres visit Toronto.

Robin Lehner has earned the heavy workload with a .931 save percentage, but that doesn't make it easier for Johnson. He appeared in nine of the opening 10 games and had a run of 11 of 16 while Lehner was out with an ankle sprain.

"It's been tough playing probably once every two weeks, especially after getting in a lot of games, getting a rhythm and playing well," Johnson said Sunday in First Niagara Center. "It's tough not being able to keep things going or winning and having to sit after that. But it's the situation.

"It's definitely a different transition for me, but I've been through it. I just try to be a gamer. When I get my starts I make the most of it and try and get the win, just go from there."

Johnson is 14-14-3 with a .917 save percentage and 2.45 goals-against average. He's 4-2-1 in his last seven starts.

He's seemingly getting a good chance at another win against a Maple Leafs team that sold heavily at the trade deadline. Toronto is winless in five straight, but Johnson watched a depleted Sabres team play opponents tough at the end of last season.

"The challenge is not taking that team for granted and underestimating them, not respecting them," Johnson said. "Anyone can beat anyone. Even guys in the minor leagues, they come up and they have stuff to prove. Guys are playing for contracts on that team and playing for roster spots. It's an evaluation time for that organization.

"I think the biggest thing is not taking them lightly because they can still play, they can compete."

Guys still get excited playing in Toronto even during rebuilding years.

"It's lights, camera, action in TO," left wing Evander Kane said. "It's a fun place to play no matter if they're having a good season or not. Everybody's watching. I know Buffalo and Toronto have a bit of a rivalry, so it's always fun playing against those guys."

Milan Michalek, acquired from Ottawa in the Dion Phaneuf trade, is healthy and will make his Maple Leafs debut. Former Sabres forward Brad Boyes is also returning from injury. Garret Sparks (3-3, .916, 2.42) will start in goal.

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After taking the blame for Saturday's 3-2 shootout loss to Minnesota, Kane went on the ice early Sunday for extra work. He was one of only 10 skaters to take part in the optional practice. He repeatedly fired pucks into the net after failing to connect on several glorious opportunities against the Wild.

"When you watch opportunities that you had or things you could have done better, it's obvious on TV, but in the moment it's a little bit different," Kane said. "If I can get close to the top of the circle I feel confident I can beat

the goalie clean. The top of the circle in, those are the areas that I worked on today, different angles, just kind of focusing and bearing down on putting the puck in the corners I want to put it in.”

Said coach Dan Bylsma: “I like them taking responsibility and accountability in their play. I saw and noticed Evander stepping on the ice early and getting extra work in on an area where he thinks he can be better.”

With 18 goals and 10 assists in 55 games, Kane hasn’t been as productive as he’d hoped. He wants to change that.

“There’s 16 games left, and I think we’re going to try to win every game,” Kane said. “Obviously, I’m going to try to score every game. For me it’s just finishing off the year strong and trying to win as many games as possible. Hopefully, have some fun down the stretch here with the guys.”

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Goalie Michael Leighton, who spent the 2005-06 season in the Sabres’ organization, made history over the weekend. Leighton recorded his 46th shutout Saturday to set the career record in the American Hockey League. The previous mark of 45 had been held for nearly 59 years by Johnny Bower.

Leighton, who plays for the Rockford IceHogs, had two shutouts in 40 appearances with Rochester a decade ago. He is 27-6-8 this season, his 15th as a professional. He also holds the AHL record for most saves in a playoff game, stopping 98 shots during a five-overtime loss with Albany in 2008.

Sabres notebook: Reinhart, Eichel finding a connection

By Mike Harrington
Buffalo News
March 6, 2016

Sam Reinhart to Jack Eichel to the back of the net.

A no-look pass from one of the Buffalo Sabres' No. 2 overall draft picks to the other was the highlight of the day Saturday in a 3-2 shootout loss to Minnesota.

The goal came at 6:38 of the second period and gave the Sabres two in 83 seconds as Minnesota's Nino Niederreiter sat out a four-minute penalty for high sticking Buffalo defenseman Jake McCabe.

Reinhart took a pass from Cal O'Reilly near the goal to the right of Wild goaltender Devin Dubnyk. He pivoted, shielded the puck to create space and whipped it across the ice to Eichel in the right circle as two Wild players and Dubnyk overcommitted to him.

The quick pass was right on Eichel's stick and the rookie made no mistake with a snapshot for his team-high 19th goal of the season.

"He didn't look at me," Eichel said "And he was looking away from the net. It's a great no-look pass by him."

"When you know who is on the ice, you'll know they're going to put themselves in a position where the puck kind of has to go and where it should go," Reinhart said. "You saw before the play developed he was already standing there waiting for it. To be able to finish it the way it did was great."

Reinhart and Eichel together with Evander Kane has been the Sabres' top line with the injury to Ryan O'Reilly.

"I don't think we were very good with each other to be honest with you at the start of the year but we've been able to find chemistry as of late especially," Reinhart said of Eichel. "We're getting that much more comfortable with each other, both 5-on-5 and the power play. Obviously he's an easy guy to play with. Hopefully we can keep that going."

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The Sabres had four shots on goal in the 3-on-3 overtime period and seemed noticeably more aggressive this time. Part of that, Bylsma admitted, was hoping to take advantage of Minnesota's 1-8 record in the extra session. And part of that was simply a conscious decision at home to get matchups and better changes.

The Sabres remained 2-3 in overtime decisions and fell to 1-6 in shootouts.

"We've been trying to win every darn 3-on-3 we've gotten into," Bylsma said. "We're not playing for the shootout. I think with just the troops that we had, we wanted to go with the six guys that we did."

Bylsma was referring to a six-pack of players who saw the ice more than a minute in overtime. Rasmus Ristolainen led the way at 2 minutes, 50 seconds. Eichel played 2:32, Brian Gionta was at 1:57, Reinhart 1:54, Evander Kane 1:49 and Zach Bogosian 1:35.

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The Buffalo penalty kill entered the game 27 for its last 29 and up to eighth in the NHL but failed on its only opportunity Saturday and it was a key spot. The Sabres were nursing a 2-1 lead when Josh Gorges went off for tripping at 13:45 of the third period.

It took just 34 seconds for the Wild to tie it, as Mikko Koivu drilled a one-timer home off a neat cross-ice feed from defenseman Matt Dumba.

"We just got overly aggressive on a play to the back of the net," Bylsma said. "They turned off it, made a quick play through the seam right in front. ... It's disappointing at that point in the game. We're 5½ to go and a big kill probably wins us the game. Our penalty kill has been so good for us for long periods of time. You're disappointed we're 0 for 1 tonight in that regard."

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Bylsma said O'Reilly will hit the three-week mark of his broken foot on Friday, and only then would the team consider seeing if he could start skating. Cody Franson and Tyler Ennis continue to work out on their own.

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The Wild entered the game just 1-18-5 when trailing after two periods but finally bucked that trend to pull out a victory. The Sabres were 17-3-1 when leading after two.

Pominville sparks memories of days gone by

By Jerry Sullivan
Buffalo News
March 6, 2016

Jason Pominville stood at center ice, preparing for his shootout attempt and thinking how Charlie Coyle, his Wild teammate and fellow right-handed shot, had changed his angle to beat goalie Robin Lehner two shooters earlier.

Then Pominville heard the boos cascading from the crowd at the First Niagara Center. He laughed to himself, gathered the puck and skated down the ice for the Wild's fourth shootout chance.

"I thought it was pretty funny," Pominville said after Minnesota's 3-2 victory. "The boos were good. I kind of expected it. It was fun. I just wanted to get my job done and get two points."

Still, it was weird to hear Pominville being booed Saturday afternoon in Buffalo with the game on his stick. How could you not flash back to the glory days, to that magical night in May of 2006 when he scored in overtime to beat Ottawa and send the Sabres on to the conference finals?

Has it really been that long since Rick Jeanneret called them "scary good" and told us the "population of Pominville" went up by one every time he scored?

Ten years since Pominville and Thomas Vanek, his Minnesota teammate, were rookies on a young, exciting team that took this town on a wild ride?

In some ways, that OT goal that beat Ottawa was the peak event of that time, the last shining moment of that team's innocence.

"Yeah, I think about that goal once in awhile," Pominville said. "Guys bring it up, or I'll see it or talk about it. But it is something that kind of got me more established and feeling comfortable."

He's 33 years old now, on the back end of his career. Early next month, it will be three years since the Sabres shipped Pominville, their captain, to the Wild (with a fourth-round pick) for Johan Larsson, Matt Hackett, a first-round pick in 2013 and a second-rounder in 2014.

This season has been a difficult one for Pominville. He didn't score a goal in his first 21 games and went 16 games without a goal later in the season. But with the Wild surging under interim coach John Torchetti, he has hit his stride, scoring five goals and 11 points in his last 10 games before Saturday's matinee.

And one thing hasn't changed since that night in '06: Pominville is one of the most dangerous shooters in the NHL with the outcome on the line. Entering Saturday's game, he was 24 for 63 in his career in shootouts – with seven game-winners. No wonder he was smiling at the boos.

Pominville skated in on Lehner and beat him low to the stick side to give Minnesota its fourth straight victory and eighth in 11 games since Torchetti took over for Mike Yeo with the Wild in an eight-game losing skid. The Wild are now alone in the eighth and final playoff spot in the West

Did the population of Pominville increase by one, I asked him?

"I hope so!" he said with a laugh.

He still treasures those days. Pominville basically grew up in Buffalo. He was drafted in 2001 and spent 12 years in the organization. Funny how things happen: Saturday, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart became the first Sabres rookie tandem to each score 30 points since, yes, Pommer and Vanek in 2005-06.

Does that make you feel old, he was asked? "No. I feel young," he said. "It'll always be special coming here. I came here as a kid and I left as a dad. So it'll always be a special place for me."

The population of the Pominville household has increased by two. He and his wife have a son, 6, and daughter, 4. He's made a nice living in hockey. He was making \$5 million in Buffalo and signed a five-year, \$28 million extension when the Wild traded for him three years ago.

What he wants now is another shot at the Cup. He reached the conference finals his first two seasons in the league. It seemed easy enough, but has found out otherwise. The Wild have lost to Chicago in the playoffs all three of his years in Minnesota, the last two years in the second round.

"We had a solid group" early in Buffalo "and we were hoping it would stay together awhile," he said. "You realize how things can change quick. Younger guys make more money. Salary cap arrives and you've got to get rid of some guys and keep others. Tough decisions for management and there you go.

"There's only a couple of guys left that I played with on that team. It is what it is. They've made some good moves. They'll be a good team going forward. They have some good young players and those two," Eichel and Reinhart, "are going to be a big part of the franchise for awhile."

The tough decision for the Sabres came three years ago. The Wild paid dearly, knowing Pominville was a dependable two-way player. He has played in 230 straight games for Minnesota, the third-longest streak in Wild history. He played in 82 regular-season games five times for the Sabres.

Pominville left Saturday's game in the first period after suffering a lower body injury, a "quick strain," as he called it. But he returned in the second period. As usual, when the game went into extra time, he was ready.

The boos were to be expected. The real question was, why the heck wasn't he one of Minnesota's designated first three guys in the shootout?

Mailbag: Bylsma deserves at least part of blame for Sabres' inconsistency

By Jerry Sullivan
Buffalo News
March 7, 2016

Welcome back. I imagine skipping another week was unsettling, like the defunct notion of the U.S. Postal Service cutting out Saturday delivery.

Schedules are unpredictable at this time of year. We're off again next week so I can cover UB in the MAC Tournament, assuming it gets that far. Anyway, the mail is piling up; I'll get to as many as I can:

goatsgruff@yahoo.com asks: The Sabres have made strides forward, but they're still terrible. Why is Bylsma being given a free pass? As every game ends, I'm convinced he did nothing more than ride the coattails of Crosby and Malkin.

Sully: It's true that Bylsma has been coddled by much of the media since taking over as the Sabres' coach. But it was refreshing to see Mike Harrington remove the gloves in Friday's column, taking Bylsma to task for his obstinate nature and dubious strategies.

A lot of people expected the Sabres to challenge for the playoffs this season. But they've flirted with 30th all season and have one of their worst home records in history. Bylsma is the head coach. He deserves a share of blame for his team's dismal performance.

As Harrington pointed out, Bylsma's line combinations have been perplexing. His power play has been abysmal of late. His decision not to send out Jack Eichel for the opening faceoff against Connor McDavid was a tone-deaf refusal to give loyal, suffering fans a special moment.

Granted, Bylsma has an inferior roster. But he has a lot more to work with than poor Ted Nolan, whose hockey acumen was questioned at every opportunity by his critics. Why don't we hear more about Bylsma's "X's and O's"? Is it because he won a Cup and coached the U.S. Olympic team?

The fanboys will hand him excuses. They'll point to Ryan O'Reilly's injury. But O'Reilly had gone 20 games without a goal before getting hurt. Eichel has two goals in his last 15 games. Perhaps the smarter opposing coaches have figured out how to defend Bylsma's system.

It's early, of course. But maybe there's a good reason why Bylsma wasn't considered a hot candidate around the NHL after losing his job in Pittsburgh. The Pegulas are paying him good money. He should be held to an equivalent standard – the same as the other new guy in town, Rex Ryan.

Craig Maz asks: Given the current mediocrity of the Sabres and the Bills' drought, let's really have some fun. Which team wins a playoff game/series first?

Sully: Great question, and a grim one. The Sabres haven't won a Cup series since 2007. The Bills haven't won a playoff game since 1995. As Craig mentioned in an addendum, that's enough to make the average fan hurl.

It's tough to say. I think the Bills are likely to get worse in the coming years. Their window was open and they slammed their heads into the sill.

The Sabres are farther away than their more deluded fans wanted to believe. So we might not see any playoffs for the time being.

But if I have to make a call, I'll go with the Bills. In the NFL, the difference between 10-6 and 6-10 is slim. If Tyrod Taylor continues to evolve and they stay healthy and Ryan remembers how to coach defense, they have a shot – although they're not likely to beat out the Patriots and would have to win a road playoff game.

I'd say the Sabres are at least two and probably years away from making the playoffs, and won't be ready to steal a series when they do.

Pete Occhiuto asks: Do you think that both Buffalo franchises are in good hands as far as coaching and management? My opinion is that we fans are in for more of the same disappointing times, especially the Bills. Zero confidence in Rex. Love Mr. Pegula.

Sully: I'm not particularly optimistic about either franchise, and it comes down to ownership. All the Pegulas have really demonstrated is an ability to throw piles of money at players and recycled coaching stars like Rex Ryan and Dan Bylsma.

How can you have such a low opinion of Ryan and love the owner? He's the one who brought him here. I suspect a lot of fans feel that way. They're gaga over the Pegulas (look, they're building things!) and willing to overlook the fact that they haven't won a damn thing and ran the Sabres into the basement.

And sorry, but this is a huge pet peeve of mine: Why "Mr. Pegula?" It's always annoyed me how people use the "Mr." designation for rich people (especially when media people do it).

How much does a person have to be worth to warrant the deferential "Mr." treatment?

Michalek set for Maple Leafs debut

NHL.com

March 7, 2016

SABRES (26-31-9) at MAPLE LEAFS (21-33-10)

TV: 7:30 p.m. ET; BELL-TV, MSG-B, TSN4, NHL-TV

Season series: The Buffalo Sabres defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 2-1 in a shootout at First Niagara Center on Oct. 21. Sabres forward Evander Kane scored the game-tying goal with 4:21 remaining in the third period and Matt Moulson scored the shootout winner. Toronto goalie Jonathan Bernier made 34 saves and P.A. Parenteau scored for the Maple Leafs.

Sabres team scope: Goalie Chad Johnson will start Monday. He has started once in the past 10 games. Johnson and Kane were among 10 players who participated in an optional practice Sunday. "It's lights, camera, action in [Toronto]," Kane said. "It's a fun place to play, no matter if they're having a good season or not. Everybody's watching. I know Buffalo and Toronto have a bit of a rivalry, so it's always fun playing against those guys." Forwards Tyler Ennis (upper body), Ryan O'Reilly (lower body) and defenseman Cody Franson (neck) are out. The Sabres have points in four of their past five games (2-1-2).

Maple Leafs team scope: Goalie Garret Sparks will start. Right wing Brad Boyes (upper body) and left wing Milan Michalek (finger) will return. They practiced on a line with center Peter Holland on Sunday. It will be Michalek's debut for the Maple Leafs since he was acquired in a trade for Dion Phaneuf with the Ottawa Senators last month. Michalek has not played since Jan. 22. Parenteau (upper body) practiced Sunday, but will not play. Defenseman Matt Hunwick was given a maintenance day Sunday, but is expected to play. Kasperii Kapanen and Brendan Leipsic were reassigned to the Toronto Marlies of the American Hockey League. The Maple Leafs have lost five straight.

Rough season taking its toll on Sabres coach Dan Bylsma

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 7, 2016

TORONTO – This is all a new experience for Buffalo Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, you know – the losing, the expectation the Stanley Cup will be won in the near future, not immediately.

Bylsma stormed into the NHL seven years ago, leading the Pittsburgh Penguins to a championship just months later. While Bylsma endured a string of playoff failures in the ensuing five seasons, he kept winning, reaching 200 victories faster than any coach in NHL history (316 games).

When the Sabres hired Bylsma in May, his .668 points percentage – 252-117-52 – ranked No. 1 among coaches with at least three seasons of experience.

Entering tonight's tilt against the Maple Leafs, the Sabres have lost 40 of his first 66 games (26-31-9). Bylsma had never lost more than 35 times in a full season. He hasn't missed the playoffs since he was a first-year assistant coach with the New York Islanders 10 years ago.

"It's not something I'm real comfortable with," Bylsma said about losing.

Bylsma, of course, understood resurrecting the Sabres following their deep rebuild could be an arduous task, especially early on. But Bylsma's only human. The trying season has been difficult for the affable American to handle at times.

With wins suddenly harder to come by, Bylsma has started cherishing the triumphs more and more.

Following a tight road victory in November, a giddy Bylsma was seen pumping his fist leaving the bench. After a recent win, someone asking for a high-five got his hand slapped with unusual fervor by Bylsma.

"I probably have been, yes, more exuberant and more emotional, probably both ways – winning and losing," Bylsma said Sunday inside the First Niagara Center. "It takes a toll on you not winning hockey games and not getting success."

Throughout the struggles of 2015-16, Bylsma hasn't flinched or wavered from the process he believes the Sabres must follow to morph into a contender, defenseman Josh Gorges said.

Each day, Sabres goalie Chad Johnson said, Bylsma has a fresh focus.

"He really brings a strong identity and culture to the team, which, being here last year, I think you saw it on the ice, there's no real identity of the team," he said. "This year, you can see we have a little bit more of an identity as much as maybe we're struggling."

That identity is formed in a lot of different ways. To Gorges, it starts with the structure Bylsma has instilled "all the way through" the team.

It's "how you prepare for practice," he said. "(The actual) practice. Knowing in any and every situation, what's your job? Where you supposed to be? Where should the puck go? Where should your support be?"

"The little, little details of a game. It's not an easy thing to pick up, but I think we have and we still are progressing and getting better with all that stuff, which is making us a better team."

Bylsma's personality – he's usually smiling and talks up anybody within earshot – rubs off on his team.

"Lot of energy," Gorges said. "You can see that he has a passion for this game."

The Sabres have improved in nearly every facet following consecutive 30th-place finishes.

Nonetheless, they're still a bottom-feeder. They often play terribly at home (12-17-5), rank 26th overall and have scored the third-fewest goals.

On the bright side, they're a strong road team (14-14-4), have shown they can execute a system well at times and have 21 one-goal losses, including Saturday's 3-2 home shootout defeat to Minnesota.

Maybe, just maybe, the Sabres are closer to contending than it appears.

"I think you know you're developing a process with your team and trying to build expectations to win and to win every night, and that's a process we've been in from Day One," Bylsma said. "That's one we have to learn how to play the right way. We have to learn and develop that attitude in our team."

The Cup ring Bylsma earned could help develop that attitude.

"I think when you're a part of such a strong organization in Pittsburgh winning a Stanley Cup, there's an experience that you have with what it takes, the group that you have and the pieces that you have there, how you have to play to get to that certain point of winning a Stanley Cup," Gorges said.

Sabres goalie Chad Johnson to start Monday

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 7, 2016

BUFFALO – For the last few weeks, the starts have come less frequently for Chad Johnson. After playing 32 of the first 56 games, the Sabres goalie has played one of the last 10 contests with No. 1 Robin Lehner healthy and finding a groove.

Johnson, who will start Monday's tilt in Toronto, hasn't played since stopping 24 shots in the Sabres' 3-1 win Feb. 26 in San Jose.

Of course, Johnson understands his role as a No. 2 netminder. Still, after earning so much action earlier this season, sitting recently has been "different," Johnson said.

"It's been tough playing probably once every two weeks, especially after playing (two out of three like) I was doing early on, getting in a lot of games, getting in a rhythm," he said this afternoon. "It is tough not being able to sort of keep things going."

Johnson, 29, has posted strong numbers this season, going 14-14-3 with a 2.45 goals-against average and a .917 save percentage in a career-high 33 games (29 starts). His career numbers against the Maple Leafs – 2-0-1, 2.02, .924 – are terrific.

It was believed the Sabres would try to deal Johnson, an unrestricted free agent following the season, before Monday's trade deadline.

"Monday was anxious, exciting kind of day," he said. "A lot of unknowns."

He added: "It was a very stressful day."

Johnson's happy he's still here. His tenure with the Sabres could be over in a few months, however.

"For moving forward, contract-wise, playing time, whether that's a good spot for me next year, I'll have to deal with that when the time comes in the summer," he said.

The Sabres had an optional practice this morning inside the First Niagara Center. Coach Dan Bylsma said there are no new injuries.

Sabres players take it to the film room.

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 7, 2016

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Every team in the NHL has video available to the players. Many go over every shift to try to see little things and maybe big things in their games.

Players look at their video alone and with coaches. Dan Bylsma said, "There's a process of evaluating and looking at your game. What's expected of you, how we need to play and you can look at your shifts and not have any of that in your evaluation, but when you sit down with the players and go through their video and go through their shifts and go through their responsibilities and how they need to play, then looking at it is a form of getting better."

The game is so fast, there are things on the ice that a player might not realize. Video can help with that. "I just sat with Robin a few moments ago going through his puck touches and that's an area of the game we continue to work on and he continues to work on and what he sees on the video is maybe something different than he sees in a game."

Evander Kane watches his shifts, but he said you can't get too wrapped up in that, "Hindsight is always 20/20. Things you could've done better look obvious on TV, but in the moment it's a little bit different, so you get out of it what you can do next time."

Johan Larsson's game has improved greatly the past month or so, just like it did at this time last year. Larsson said, "I try to look at my shifts to see small things I can do better like positioning."

There are other ways for accountability and two players in particular were upset with their play against Minnesota. Bylsma said, "On the offensive side of it, Evander felt like he should've scored a goal for us and should've gotten us the win. I know on the defensive side, Josh Gorges feels the same way with the play in the third period that led to the penalty and the eventually led to the goal was one he feels responsible for and would've liked to have done differently, so I like that in our players, I like them taking responsibility and accountability in their play."

The Sabres had an optional practice Sunday before leaving for Toronto.

9 star players who could end up on Jack Eichel's wing

By Matthew Coller

WGR 550

March 7, 2016

In an interview with WGR, Buffalo Sabres general manager Tim Murray hinted at the possibility of acquiring a winger to play alongside Jack Eichel next season and beyond. Eichel has statistically had the best chemistry this season with Zemgus Girgensons, producing 2.93 goals per 60 minutes at even strength together. It is possible Girgensons' skillset could compliment Eichel very well considering Zemgus chases down pucks, forechecks hard and has some offensive skill. Consider a player like Pascal Dupuis playing with Sidney Crosby for a long time or Alex Burrows next to the Sedins.

A true top line will need another piece in order to be dominant. Henrik has Daniel, Toews has Hossa, Ovechkin has Backstrom and on and on. If the Sabres win the draft lottery or end up picking in the top three, that top-end offensive talent could be there in the form of Auston Matthews, Jesse Puljujärvi or Patrik Laine. If not, Murray will look to free agency and the trade market.

Here are 10 star players that could be available:

Tampa Bay Lightning, Steven Stamkos

It seemed completely unrealistic until recently when TSN's Darren Dreger wrote a column declaring the Toronto Maple Leafs' chances of landing the former 60-goal scorer to be "remote." Dreger wrote that the Leafs' rebuild may not match up with Stamkos' demands as he wants to win soon. The Sabres are one of only a few teams that have the salary cap room to afford paying Stamkos \$11 million per year. The Lightning are still the favorite to keep him, but as time goes on, it becomes less and less likely they will dole out the cash it will take. Plus, Tampa Bay is in a tough spot with their future salary cap. Could the idea of playing with Eichel entice Stamkos? It isn't crazy.

Tampa Bay Lightning, Jonathan Drouin

Murray has said before he loves players who were picked at the top of the draft. Drouin is on the outs with the Lightning after conflicts over playing time. There are red flags since he stopped playing altogether after being sent to the AHL, but his playmaking gifts might be the perfect fit for Eichel's incredible shot. While he only has six goals, the former No. 3 overall pick has 34 assists while playing limited minutes. You have to think if he was given a full-time spot with Eichel, Drouin would be a lot happier than he has been in Tampa.

St. Louis Blues, Jaden Schwartz

It will take a ton of salary cap magic for the Blues to keep their Restricted Free Agent winger. They signed superstar Vladimir Tarasenko to a mega deal through 2023, giving them very little flexibility, especially considering a \$7 million cap hit for center Paul Stastny, \$6.5 million for Alex Pietrangelo and \$5.4 for Jay Bouwmeester. The Blues have also expressed interest in keeping free agent David Backes. Schwartz is 23 and has posted 56 and 63 point seasons with an exceptional rate of 5-on-5 scoring. He is a quality all-around player with a goal-scoring touch.

New York Rangers, Rick Nash

Like the Blues, the Rangers are in a lot of trouble with their salary cap situation. With only 12 goals in 45 games this season (following a 42-goal season in 2014-15), the Blue Shirts may elect to shop the 31-year-old power winger – especially if he has another sub-par postseason performance. Nash has a hefty cap hit at \$7.8 million, but he is only under contract through 2018, which just so happens to be the year that Eichel's Entry Level Contract runs out.

San Jose Sharks, Patrick Marleau

If the Sharks fail to make a deep postseason run again, it seems like a lock that Marleau will be moved at the draft. He only has one year left on his contract and has not been happy with his situation in San Jose for some time. Marleau isn't the superstar of the mid-2000s anymore, but he still has 19 goals in 63 games. As a one-year rental, he could make a nice addition to Eichel's line.

Edmonton Oilers, Taylor Hall

The Oilers would be absolutely out of their skulls to trade Hall, yet all reports indicate that they are listening on every player except Connor McDavid. Hall is the third best 5-on-5 scorer in the NHL over the past four seasons only trailing Sidney Crosby and Jamie Benn. He's an elite skater and playmaker who would create opportunities for Eichel that only about a handful of players in the entire league could. The problem: It would take A LOT to acquire Hall.

Colorado Avalanche, Gabriel Landeskog

A recent report indicated the Avs will try to trade Matt Duchene or Landeskog if they miss the playoffs this season. This also qualifies as you-gotta-be-kidding, but the young captain has a \$5.6 million cap hit that Colorado may not want to pay. They will have to pay RFAs Tyson Barrie and Nathan MacKinnon. Both will cost a pretty penny. That may open the door for a deal – though you have to wonder if the Avs would trade with Buffalo again considering how the Ryan O'Reilly deal worked out.

Carolina Hurricanes, Jeff Skinner

It would probably be a bad plan for the Hurricanes to deal a player who has a similar 5-on-5 Goals per 60 rate to Evgeni Malkin, but Skinner's name continues to come up in potential trade conversations. The stigma around Skinner is that he has a lot of injuries in the past, but he has played 71 and 77 games the last two years and has been fully healthy this season.

Ottawa Senators, Mike Hoffman

Tim Murray has made two trades with the Sens since taking over as GM and could be interested in the goal-scoring winger. Where Hoffman struggles defensively, he makes up for with speed and a deadly shot. It seems pretty likely the Senators will want to keep him around, Hoffman is an RFA and will have big contract demands after back-to-back impressive seasons. He has 25 goals this year after 27 last season.

Larsson's confidence on offense grows with recent goals

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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With three games at home in the past week, Johan Larsson has had his father and a couple of friends in town from Sweden since last Sunday. They sat and watched Sunday as Larsson participated in one last optional practice at First Niagara Center before departing for Toronto, where the Buffalo Sabres will play on Monday night.

Larsson picked a good week to have his family in town. He's scored twice during the homestand, once in a win over Calgary on Thursday and again on the power play against Minnesota on Saturday. His father has come to see him in Buffalo before, but these have been the first two times he's seen him score.

The 23-year-old center has five goals this season, but only these last two have been at home and he's scored four times since the beginning February.

He'd had his fair share of chances before, but – with the exception of a game-winner in Detroit on Dec. 14 – those chances always seemed to either miss the net or deflect off of a defender. It's something he's worked on, and he continued that work on Sunday.

"It's just going in for me now, I'm kind of a little more confident," Larsson said. "I've been trying to work on it every day in practice, try to score a lot of goals and think about it. Trying to hit the net, hit the right spots, kind of that stuff."

Larsson's low scoring numbers prior to the last month weren't a major concern given the specific role he and linemates Marcus Foligno and Brian Gionta have played for the team. They've been a "shutdown line" for Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, matching up defensively against other teams' top players.

"He's done a real good job in that spot and I kind of think that's where his role is on the team," Bylsma said. "I think that's a very good spot for him to be in and one I think he's showing he can be in and be effective."

"... The fact that that he's picked up a couple goals lately is just a benefactor of him being in the right spot at the right time. I think he can add in that regard, but really [he's been] more a checking, defensive, hard-to-play-against guy."

Being able to score goals while also managing those defensive responsibilities, Larsson said, has been a learning process both in tactics and in patience. If you're defending a line starring Zach Parise, as he was against Minnesota, for example, you know you're going to be spending time in your own zone.

The key, Larsson said, is respecting the talent of the players he's facing and keeping his own frustration level to a minimum when those situations do occur.

"First of all you want to try and shut them down so they don't score, but I mean you've got to [not] get frustrated with yourself, they're going to be in your zone and play and they're good players so you're going to have to respect that," Larsson said.

"At the same time, you've got to play down there and make them defend. I think that's the most important thing ... Get them a little bit frustrated about their game and then maybe you can score a goal or two."

POWER-PLAY PROGRESS

Bylsma said his team was able to breathe a "sigh of relief" after Jack Eichel scored a power-play goal to snap a

four-game goalless drought on Thursday. Cal O'Reilly, who assisted on Eichel's power-play goal in the next game against Minnesota, said that ending that drought against the Flames carried over into the Wild game.

"It gives us confidence," he said. "It gives the team confidence when we're executing on the power play and we're getting chances and they start going in, it definitely can feed into the next game."

After a 1-for-8 game against the Flames, the Sabres got goals from Larsson and Eichel on their only two power play of the night against the Wild, both on a double-minor penalty called in the second period.

"We've gone through some power plays in the last eight games and opportunities to get goals, win hockey games, and we've missed those opportunities. It's been a source of frustration," Bylsma said.

"Last game; it was a critical time in the game for us. We had to step over the boards and execute and I thought we did a great job of that with both units ... executing, executing with purpose and the result is two big goals for us in yesterday's game."

UP NEXT

The Sabres will play the first of three games in March against the rival Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday night at Air Canada Centre. Coverage begins at 7 p.m. with Tops Sabres Gamenight on MSG-B and Bell TV. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.